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Does It Make Any Difference What A Man Believes?

A Sermon

Preached in the
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by the Pastor
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DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE WHAT A MAN
BELIEVES?

You have heard it said:

"It doesn't make any difference what a man believes; it is only what he does that counts.

"A man may be a Catholic or a Protestant or a Jew or a Gentile or a Christian or a Mohammedan; if he pays his debts, what is the difference?

"The trouble with preachers is that they are always discussing theology. If only they would give theology a rest for awhile, and get down to something practical, they would do a great deal more good. Theology is something up in the air; what we need is something that can walk on all fours.

"If I were a preacher, which thank Heaven I am not, I'd preach the Sermon on the Mount. I'd give them a good dose of the Golden Rule. That's creed enough for any man. Get people to do unto others as they would have others do unto them and you will solve every kind of problem in the church and out of it. It doesn't make a bit of difference what people believe; it is only what they do that counts."

It all sounds very fine, doesn't it? But there is only one honest American word to apply to it, and that is "bunk!"

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Consider the popular demand for the Sermon on the Mount. One cannot help wondering just how much of this deservedly famous sermon people really want to hear; and what they would think and say and do if certain portions of it were presented to them with modern illustrations. But let us assume that persons who clamor for the Sermon on the Mount are really eager to hear it. How much of it could any one preach to them without entering the forbidden realm of theology?

The Sermon begins with the statement: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The poor in spirit, it appears, are going to have the kingdom of heaven. But what's that? Well, in Jesus' day, "kingdom of heaven" was a phrase used interchangeably with the expression "kingdom of God." And what, please, does that mean? Will anybody undertake to tell us without dabbling in theology?

Read on, and you find this: "Blessed are the pure in heart; they shall see God." Ah! Is there a God? Can anybody see him? Is he visible to the pure in heart? Why? In what sense? Don't preach theology, but tell us!

Reading still farther in this popular Sermon, you come upon this: "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that spitefully use you." But why should anybody love his enemies? Why should a man do good to somebody who has done his best to injure him? Will some one answer that question for us?

Jesus says that we ought to love our enemies because God loves them. If God, who knows quite as much about our enemies as we do, can find it possible to love them, we ought to be able to do so.

But how do we know that God loves our enemies? How do we know that God loves anybody? It doesn't always look as if he did! Why are so many innocent people permitted to suffer—little children, for instance, who cannot tell their left hand from their right? Why is there so much pain and heartache in the world if God loves people? Don't preach theology, but tell us!

"And when ye pray," says Jesus, "be not as the hypocrites." Pray! Why should any one pray? What has prayer got to do with the great, dread business of living? To be sure we ought not to pray as the hypocrites do. We ought not to do anything pious as hypocrites do it. But why should we pray at all? Is there any one to hear us when we pray? Do our prayers rise any higher than the ceiling? Is there anything to be accomplished through prayer? Can prayer change anything? Don't preach theology, but tell us!

Towards the close of this wonderful Sermon Jesus says: "Be not anxious saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or Wherewithal shall we be clothed? * * * * Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But seek ye first his Kingdom, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." Will they?

Is it true, then, that every man who is without a job today is some kind of sinner who hasn't been seeking God's kingdom or God's righteousness, but something else and something wicked? Is that true of every jobless man who is trying hard, as winter approaches, not to worry about what he shall eat, or about what he shall drink, or about the way in which his wife and children shall be clothed?

Jesus says that we ought not to be anxious about such things; that our heavenly Father knows that we need such things. But if He knows, why does He not provide them for the starving millions of Russia? We don't want to listen to any theological discussion, but we would like to have this matter explained to us!

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Consider also the popular demand for the Golden Rule: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them." Why? In the oft-quoted words of David Harum, why should

we not, rather, "do unto others as they would do unto us, and do it first?"

The answer which Jesus gives is that God is our Father; that we, therefore, are all brothers; and brothers ought to treat one another as each would have others treat him. But that answer leads us straight into the forbidden realm of theology, and we do not want the parson to prate about theology; we want him to talk about something practical.

But in the most practical kind of practical thinking the question is bound to arise, Is the Golden Rule golden? Is it not, perhaps, just leaden after all? What reason have we to call it golden?

"Because it works," some one replies—some enthusiastic disciple of William James. Ah, it works, does it? Where? Where is it being given a chance to work?

"In the home."

Yes, we will gladly acknowledge that. In thousands of homes, fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters are doing unto others as they would have others do unto them, and the result is helpfulness and happiness—a bit of heaven on earth. Let God be thanked, the Golden Rule has been given a chance to prove itself golden in thousands of homes! Where else?

"In the church."

Perhaps. But one who knows anything about ecclesiastical institutions finds himself wondering in how many churches wealthy members and poor members, millionaires and mechanics, professors and printers—and their wives—are regulating their behavior, one toward another, in accordance with the Golden Rule.

Where else is the Golden Rule being given a chance to work?

"In industry."

In a few industries, undeniably. And in every case where the Golden Rule is being sincerely applied the results are very marked and very encouraging. But what are these few industries among so many in which the only rule that is being followed seems to be: Every fellow for himself, and God for us all, "as the elephant said when it danced among the chickens"? When you consider the startling spectacle of huge organizations of labor pitted against huge organizations of capital in what, at times, as recently in West Virginia, comes little short of being civil war, can you say that in the world of industry, considered as a whole, the Golden Rule is being given much of a chance to show whether it is golden?

And there is, of course, one more question to be put: Is the Golden Rule being given a chance to work in the great arena of international contacts?

We are waiting with bated breath for the outcome of the Conference at Washington. Meanwhile, we are obliged to acknowledge that, with a few brilliant exceptions, such as America's treatment of China, the Golden Rule has been, not perhaps deliberately denied, but without doubt deliberately ignored, by cynical, selfish, scheming nations.

And yet, some one insists, the Golden Rule would work if it were given a chance. Not only in the home, but in the church, in industry, in diplomacy, throughout all the length and breadth and height and depth of human life. And I say to this man: "I admire your faith. I not only admire it, I share it. But you and I may just as well acknowledge that what we are going on is faith—faith in the ultimate decency of things; faith that the universe intends brotherhood; that life is making for love; that there is a God whose character is the guarantee of a better social order." And the moment I say that I am preaching THEOLOGY spelled with capital letters from T to Y!

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When you begin to examine it you discover that the Sermon on the Mount is crammed full of theology; not, to be sure, of theological definitions; but, certainly, of theological implications; so that you simply cannot consider this immortal Sermon without considering a vast deal of theology.

Fix your eye upon any one of these marvelous sayings of Jesus. Then begin to follow it, and observe where it leads. You will make the rather startling discovery that it leads you straight to Jesus' thought about God. You may begin with what looks like sheer, unadulterated morality. But if you venture to ask, *Why this particular moral injunction?* almost before you realize what has happened, you have landed kerplunk into theology.

The fact of the matter is that the Sermon on the Mount makes demands upon us that are nothing less than stupendous.

Some of these demands cut across the grain of our natural inclinations; as, for example, the commandment to turn the other cheek, and to speak decently, temperately, even kindly, to some rapsallion who has just cursed us.

And some of these demands tax to the utmost the powers of ordinary human nature; as, for example, the commandment not to hate, but rather to love, even enemies; and the demand for a clean mind, not merely a clean record.

It is only natural that we should want to know the reason for such demands. What right has Jesus to make them? And there are, it seems to me, just two answers which might be given to this inevitable question. One is that Jesus has no right; that such demands as these are presumptuous. The other is that Jesus has every right, because he was and is the supreme revelation of the purpose of life, the supreme expression of the heart of the Eternal, the human image of God, the Father, "thru whom all things were made, and without whom was not anything made that hath been made." And the moment this second answer is given, we are, of course, in the presence of the sublimest bit of theology that has ever been wrought out in the mind of man.

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For sheer, unthinking stupidity could anything be worse than this:

"It doesn't make any difference what a man believes; it is only what he does that counts?" As if men who do things never bother themselves about a reason for doing them. As if men who pay their debts, for instance, have never thought out any reason why a person should pay his debts, but have just obeyed a curious impulse to go and pay them!

How long would you be willing to do business with a man who had no *convictions* on the subject of the payment of debts? When it comes to such an utterly practical matter as the payment of debts, most of us take the position that it does make a difference what a man believes. If he believes that a person ought to pay his debts, we are willing to do business with him. But if he believes that the payment of debts is one of those relatively unimportant questions over which respectable people may conscientiously differ, we are perfectly willing that our nearest competitor should have his trade.

If it makes no difference what a man believes, why should we maintain an enormously expensive public school system? Why should we tax ourselves for the support of an institution which makes, and can make, very little, if any, difference in human life? And why should we send our children to college, denying ourselves in order that we may do so, if it is not what they believe, but only what they do, that counts? The very putting of such questions as these forces upon us the realization that it does make a difference what a man believes.

In 1911 a book was published that created a sensation. Its author was a distinguished soldier who had interested himself not only in the science of war, but in the philosophy of war, and this book was the confession of his faith. I state it as briefly as possible and substantially in his own words.

War, he said, is a biological necessity; a regulative element in the life of mankind that cannot be dispensed with. War, as opposed to peace, has done more to arouse national life and expand national power than any other means which history has disclosed. Even aggressive war under certain conditions is both desirable and justifiable. Strong, healthy, vigorous nations increase in numbers. They require new territory for the accommodation of their surplus population. Since almost every part of the globe is now inhabited, this new territory, in most instances, must be obtained by force, which thus becomes a law of necessity. Arbitration treaties are peculiarly detrimental to an aspiring nation that has not reached the zenith of its potential power. The Christian duty of sacrifice for something higher does not exist for the state; than the state there is nothing higher. The end-all and be-all of the state is power. When the state is involved might is the supreme right, and what is right can be decided only by the arbitrament of the sword. Let us, therefore, give earnest heed to those manly lines of Goethe:

Dream of a peaceful day?
Let him dream who may.
War is our rallying cry,
Onward to victory!

This was the creed, passionately believed in, by a man who was perfectly honest, exceedingly earnest, and very courageous. And this creed, accepted not only by him, but by thousands of men living under European skies, has gotten itself expressed in tragic deed. It has made history. It has drenched a continent in blood and tears. It has caused darkness to come over every continent. It has shaken the world.

Let no man sneer at creeds. Let him fear them, hate them, denounce them, oppose them. But let him never attempt to minimize their importance or their power.

During the Russian Japanese War Tolstoi wrote to a friend: "The great strife of our time is not that which is being carried on by mines and bombs and bullets, but a spiritual strife between the enlightened consciousness of mankind and the burdens which oppress mankind." Is it not equally true that the great strife of this present time is not so much a conflict of arms as it is a conflict of ideas and ideals? We are witnessing today the clashing of creeds. And it is going to make a vast deal of difference whether, for instance, men believe or disbelieve in the possibility of reducing armaments as a necessary step toward economic recovery, and eventual world-wide peace.

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But there is, of course, a reason for this popular belief that it doesn't make any difference what a man believes.

It does make a difference what we *really* believe. Our *real* creed determines our deed. But people are shrewd enough to see that, in the case of many of us, it doesn't make a red cent's worth of difference what we *profess* to believe. The creed we live by is something different. Our neighbors, therefore, have learned to judge us by our practices rather than by our professions. They have learned to say: "So far as we, his neighbors, are concerned, it doesn't make any difference what he (says he) believes; it is only what he does that counts." And when they make such a statement as that, shall we put them down as ignorant fools, or shall we put ourselves down as blaspheming hypocrites?

The creed which thousands of us practice—is it not a horrible mockery of the ideal of Jesus? It runs like this:

I believe in the Dollar Almighty, maker of nearly everything desirable on earth.

I believe in Seven Per Cent—and in as much more as I can safely get.

I believe in Success—measured by Salary.

I believe in getting ahead. If this means getting ahead of the other fellow,—well, I'm sorry for him; but it can't be helped.

I believe in religion, but not in too much of it. I also believe that business is business.

I believe in doing good in the world; but not to the extent of doing anything I really do not want to do, and not to the extent of giving until it hurts.

I believe that my own sins, which are not many, ought to be forgiven by a just and merciful God. But if anybody sins against me, he had better look out!

I believe in loving people who love me, and in being good to people who are good to me.

I believe that most people are not worth considering, but that a few of them are unquestionably worth while. I, of course, am one of these few.

I believe that all this talk which we hear nowadays about a coming brotherhood of mankind is sheer nonsense. When you try to tell me that a negro or a "Jap" or a Jew is my brother, you make me sick.

I believe first, last, and always in having a good time. I sincerely hope that my good time will not rob any one else of his good time; but if it does,—well, once more, I'm sorry, but it cannot be helped.

Is this unjust? Is it mere caricature? Have I been guilty of that ancient discreditable trick of introducing a straw man whom, because he is a straw man and not a real man, I can succeed in knocking down? I hope not; and if not, there is certainly some provocation for the popular judgment that it doesn't make very much difference what a man believes; it is what he does that counts.

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How imperative it is that people who profess to be Christians should make the creed of their lips the practice of their lives!

What are some of the things which, as Christians, we profess to believe?

1. We profess to believe that every man is a child of God, and, therefore, that in every man there is something of infinite value.

It is easy to believe this in the case of some great poet like Browning or Tennyson; or in the case of some great composer like Handel or Beethoven; or in the case of some great statesmen like Gladstone or Lincoln. It is not, perhaps, so easy to believe this in the case of some casual laborer with an unpronounceable foreign name who, here in America, knocks about from pillar to post in search of a job.

But, whether easy or difficult, my creed, as a Christian, obliges me to see in every man a son of God. According to my creed, there is in every man something sacred—something that should cause me to respect him, and help him to respect himself.

I cannot be at once a snob and a Christian.

I cannot, as a Christian, use any other man merely as a means of securing pleasure or profit for myself.

My creed says: A man is of more value than a sheep. He is of more value than a packing house. He is of more value than a big dividend. The "sacredness of property" is not to be mentioned in the same breath with the sacredness of personality. Property is merely a means to an end—the development of personality. Personality is an

end in itself.

Any industry which treats a man as though he were of no more value than a sheep is as fundamentally unchristian as anything could be.

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2. According to the Christian view, there is but one God, and He is Father. It follows, therefore, that all sorts and conditions of men are brothers.

I cannot deny the brotherhood of man without denying the fatherhood of God. I cannot deny the fatherhood of God and be a Christian.

Picture to yourself men of all classes looking upon one another as brothers—not as competitors whose interests conflict, but as brothers whose interests coincide.

Then picture to yourself men of all nations looking upon one another as brothers—not as potential enemies calling for suspicion and hate and increasing armaments, but as potential friends calling for good will.

Then picture to yourself men of all races looking upon one another as brothers—not as members of a different species, but as members of the same species, MAN, whose common Father is God.

That represents the ideal in which, as Christians, we profess to believe.

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3. Jesus said: I am come not to be ministered unto but to minister. As Christians, we are pledged to follow One who made service the controlling principle of his life.

We have reached this point in our social thinking. We believe that missionaries and ministers and teachers and social workers and physicians and nurses ought to serve. That is what they are here for.

Christianity says that this is what we are all here for. We are all here to serve.

Christianity refuses to place a missionary in one category and a manufacturer in another category, and to say of the missionary that he is here to serve, and of the manufacturer that he is here to make money. We are all here to serve, and only incidentally, and only in accordance with the law of service, to make money. No one is here to make money, and only incidentally, and only as it may suit his convenience, to render service.

This is an incontestable part of the Christian creed.

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4. As Christians, we profess to believe in the omnipotence of love.

The almightiness of the Christian God is not the almightiness of an oriental despot. If some man, in his ignorance or viciousness, runs amuck, the Christian God does not say, "Away with him; cut off his

head!" No, the God who has revealed his glory in the face of Jesus Christ goes forth to seek and to save this ignorant or vicious man who is in danger of doing himself and others hurt. And to save him how? Not by threatening him, but by trusting him; by appealing to his better self. Not by lording it over him, but by loving him and kindling in his cold and selfish human heart the passion of a love divine.

The omnipotence of the Christian God is not the omnipotence of physical force; it is the omnipotence of longsuffering love. The Christian God does not issue orders from a throne. He does something far more effective than that; he sends out an appeal from a cross. He does not break the heads of men. He breaks the hearts of men by revealing to them the social consequences of their sin.

Here of late we have been breaking one another's heads. Many of us appear to believe that that is the only thing to do when human relationships get out of gear. After nearly two thousand years of Christian profession, we are still obsessed with the notion that when some man develops anti-social tendencies the only thing to do is to knock him down. His hand is against us. His heart is not with us. So we will knock him down, and when he regains consciousness, he will love us very much! But whatever else this notion is, it is not Christian.

Christianity believes that love is stronger than hate; that, in the long run, you can accomplish more by kindness than you can by blows. By blows you merely break the heads of men and add to the world's doctor bill. By kindness you break the hearts of men, and create in them new hearts, and send them forth as builders of a better world.

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All over the world today, men are asking, What must we do to be saved? Intelligent people, everywhere, are awake to the fact that human society is in a pretty bad fix. "What must we do to be saved" is, therefore, a sincere question on many lips—even the lips of men who make little, if any, profession of religion.

Well, there is, under heaven, just one answer to this question: the old, old answer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house." But we must take this prescription seriously. We must stop saying one thing with our lips and another thing by our lives. It is not enough to recite on Sunday a venerable creed which contains the statement, I believe in Jesus Christ. We must show by our actions every day that we really do believe in Him.

For many months I have had a vision—the vision of a congregation of Christian people saying, not with their lips merely, but by their daily lives, such things as these:

"We believe in the sacredness of personality.

"We believe in the ideal and in the possibility of a great world-wide brotherhood.

"We believe in service as the true motive of all human endeavor.

"We believe in love as the most effective method of building for the children of tomorrow a better world."

Would not the realization of this vision bring a swift and wonderful answer to the prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy name.

Thy Kingdom come.

Thy will be done,

As in heaven, so on earth.

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Lyman Riley